



## Fighting for rights of the Roma

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### Social Action

Jews have a responsibility to campaign for the rights of gypsies and travellers because of a historical kinship, maintains the director of a Jewish human rights charity.

René Cassin's Simone Abel has put travellers' rights at the forefront of her organisation's campaigning since joining the charity last year. Ms Abel, who trained as a lawyer, said: "There's a very clear historical overlap of times when Jews and gypsies have been targets of prejudice. Our communities are similar sizes. We have both faced discrimination pre- and post-Holocaust, and been denied basic human rights. The majority of gypsies in Nazi Europe were exterminated alongside Jews."

The issue is back on the news agenda because of controversy over Dale Farm in Essex, an Irish traveller site which is home to more than 1,000 people, who the council have voted to evict by the end of August. The land is classified as green belt and homes have been built there without planning permission. The council has promised to rehouse those made homeless. René Cassin plans to lobby the council and the government on the issue, alongside gypsy organisation Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT).

"We are deeply concerned about the proposed eviction, and more broadly, the use of the Localism Bill to bring in legislation that will make it harder for long-term inhabitants of sites to continue living there," Ms Abel said.

"There is an obvious risk when local people are given the power to decide who lives in their area. Discrimination against gypsies and travellers is widespread in our society. The majority is not always right, as Jewish people know only too well."

René Cassin is recruiting lawyers to work pro bono on traveller cases and lobby the government to enshrine gypsy and traveller property rights into legislation. It is also developing an educational programme with FFT on the issue, which they hope to bring to Jewish schools. It will include a theatrical production, presentations by Holocaust survivors and an online resource on the lack of human rights protection for travellers. FFT's Chris Whitwell noted a "shared history of persecution" with the Jewish community. The vast majority of research into the Roma genocide has been carried out by Jewish academics. Romany professor Ian Hancock described the Jewish community as "practically the only friends we have, and we recognise that".

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